Maurice B. Prendergast

Whitney Museum of American Art

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Maurice B. Prendergast

A Concentration of Works from the Permanent Collection

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Maurice B. Prendergast is one of a series of exhibitions celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Each exhibition will concentrate on the work of one artist represented in depth in the Permanent Collection of the Museum. The series is sponsored by Champion International Corporation. The exhibitions were organized and the accompanying publications written by Patterson Sims, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection, with Ella Foshay, Research Assistant.

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Cover
Maurice Prendergast, **Madison Square**, ca. 1901

Introduction

Maurice B. Prendergast (1859–1924) remained a self-taught artist, earning a living as a calligrapher and illustrator, until he was in his early thirties. It was in Paris in 1891, during his second trip to Europe, that he began his first and only formal study of art. There, too, he encountered the important contemporary painting and painters of France, and the experience had a lasting influence on his art. Prendergast left America an amateur and returned a professional artist.

In 1895, Prendergast joined his brother, Charles, in Winchester, Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. Charles had started his career as a master framer. It was Charles' frame-making business, in which Maurice often assisted, that provided the brothers with an income over the next fifteen years, until Maurice's paintings and watercolors started selling regularly. During these years, as was their practice until Maurice's death, they spent the summers on the New England coast.

In the late 1890s, Prendergast's watercolors began to be exhibited in group shows, and he acquired a modest local reputation. His art was soon requested for exhibitions outside of Boston; in 1897, he exhibited in New York City for the first time. The following year, Prendergast made his third trip to Europe, visiting France and Italy. In Venice, the pageantry in the art of the Renaissance painter Carpaccio deeply impressed him, and he also produced some of the most memorable watercolors of his career: dappled, light-filled evocations of Venice, the city of stone and water.

In January 1900, at the age of forty, Prendergast received his first significant recognition outside of Boston when he was included in a two-man show with another Boston painter, Herman Dudley Murphy, at The Art Institute of Chicago. Shortly thereafter, through his friendship with William Glackens and an introduction by Arthur B. Davies, Prendergast was taken on by the Macbeth Gallery in New York and given a one-man show. He started making regular visits to the city, and commenced his series of watercolors of New York's Central Park.

Prendergast was a member of a group of artists known as The Eight – the other seven were Arthur B. Davies, Robert Henri, William Glackens, Ernest Lawson, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan. The Eight's first and only formal exhibition together occurred at the Macbeth Gallery in February 1908. The show marked a turning point in American art; the artists were linked not by a common style or subject matter, but by their opposition to the prevailing aesthetic and to the limited exhibition opportunities available outside the academic establishment. Five of them – William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks, Everett Shinn, and John Sloan – had been trained and supported themselves as pictorial reporters. Filling the need for accurate drawings of events and personalities to chronicle in

newspapers and magazines of the day, they developed a visual honesty and sensitivity to urban life which was carried over into their paintings.

Though The Eight has come to be associated with the visual reporting of unprettified and occasionally unpleasant urban or portrait subjects, the art of Prendergast, its eldest member, was more closely affiliated with modernist ideas. Modernism, the American absorption of avant-garde European styles – Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism – quickly eclipsed the significance of The Eight as a revolutionary force in American art. Stressing color, form, and line, American modernism became, in John Sloan's words, "a medicine for the disease of imitating appearances."[1] One critic noted caustically of Prendergast's work in The Eight's show that it looked "like an explosion in a color factory"[2] – a remark that would later have been considered complimentary. Another writer suggested that the show would be better if it were "The Seven," having characterized Prendergast's contributions as "artistic tommy-rot, unadulterated slop."[3] Because of his association with The Eight, Prendergast's commitment to modernism and his real achievement as a modernist have been minimalized and misunderstood.[4]

Prendergast visited Europe four times between 1907 and the outbreak of the First World War. He had been one of the earliest and most enthusiastic American advocates of Cézanne's work. His visit to the 1907 Cézanne retrospective in Paris confirmed his enthusiasm. Later that year, writing about a show of Cézanne watercolors, he noted the artist "left everything to the imagination; they [the watercolors] are great for their simplicity and suggestive qualities."[5] Prendergast's visits to Paris in these years of extraordinary creativity and innovation fortified his modernist aesthetic. By 1913, when seven of his paintings and watercolors were selected for the Armory Show, his vision had been firmly focused. Prendergast went to the exhibition and sketched paintings there by Gauguin, Matisse, and Van Gogh. Also of special interest to him were works by the Nabis and by his friends Charles Conder, Herman Dudley Murphy, Charles H. Pepper, and his fellow members of The Eight.

In 1914 Prendergast made his seventh and final trip abroad. He returned to the United States later that year and moved to New York with Charles in the late fall. They settled at 50 Washington Square South, the same building where William Glackens and his family lived. Geographically, the area was the center of the New York art world. Prendergast was fifty-five; it was to be his final residence. He and his brother, freed by Maurice's growing success from the need to support themselves through the framing business, devoted their full energies to their art, Charles making the golden, fancifully painted, carved panels with their cheerful groups of figures in nature for which he is known. Maurice, almost completely deaf, lived a hermetic existence. Even though he lived in the middle of the city, he continued to paint seascapes, inspired by his summers on the New England coast.

Friendly but laconic, Maurice Prender-

gast remained "a man whose most vital relationships were artistic rather than human."[6] In his sketchbooks one finds quotations from Nietzsche and others of a dark, morose, and puzzling nature. Yet the world in Prendergast's art is light-filled, elegiac, and celebratory.

In May 1930, the Whitney Museum made its first acquisition of a work by Maurice Prendergast. That year Juliana Force, originally Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney's secretary and then Director of the Museum from 1930 until her death in 1948, bought for the collection Prendergast's *The Cove* from the C. W. Kraushaar Art Galleries in New York. A year later, in November 1931, *Bathing Beach* was purchased from the Daniel Gallery. Both purchases were part of an extensive program of acquisitions undertaken between the announcement of the formation of the Whitney Museum in January 1930 and its actual opening in November 1931. The following year, Mrs. Force visited Charles Prendergast in Westport, Connecticut, and acquired two early watercolors of Central Park and the painting *Cinerarias and Fruit*. In 1939, two 1892 paintings, *Dieppe* and *Along the Seine*, were bought, again from the artist's brother. These were the Museum's last purchases of Prendergast's work. Since then, gifts and bequests, particularly those made through the generosity of Arthur G. Altschul, a Trustee of the Museum, have added eight additional Prendergasts to the Permanent Collection.

In 1934, ten years after Maurice Prendergast's death, the Museum held a memorial exhibition of his paintings and watercolors. Though in 1926 the Cleveland Museum of Art had organized the first retrospective of his art, the Whitney Museum exhibition was the first comprehensive Prendergast show ever held by a New York museum. And as the critic Helen Appleton Read observed, neither The Metropolitan Museum of Art nor the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where Prendergast had lived most of his life, either owned or had organized an exhibition of his work. In the *New York Herald Tribune*, Royal Cortissoz extolled the Whitney Museum's show: "[Prendergast] has never before received such a tribute. . . . These numerous works afford, indeed, a new idea of his singularity and allurement."[7]

Since this first show, the Museum has included Prendergast's pictures in numerous group exhibitions and selections from the Permanent Collection. In addition, the Museum has frequently lent its Prendergast paintings and watercolors to exhibitions in this country and abroad. To commemorate the centennial of his birth, a Prendergast retrospective was organized by Hedley H. Rhys and shown at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston in 1960. This exhibition traveled to the Whitney Museum in February of the following year. The present "Concentration" includes all fifteen Prendergasts in the Whitney Museum's Permanent Collection. Though lacking a watercolor of Venice, a portrait, and any of his monotypes, the collection still offers one of the most representative selections of Prendergast's art in a public institution.

Patterson Sims

Maurice Brazil Prendergast (1859–1924)

1859
Born (with twin sister) on October 10, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada. Mother, Mary Malvinor Germaine, of French Huguenot descent; father, Maurice Prendergast, of Irish ancestry, owns a trading post.

1861
Father's business fails; family moves to Boston, Massachusetts, where his mother had come from. Boston remains Prendergast's permanent home until 1914.

1863
Brother Charles born.

1873
Graduates from Rice Grammar School and starts working for Loving and Waterhouse, a Boston dry goods store. Begins sketching. Later earns his livelihood as a calligrapher in a commercial firm, where eventually he learns graphic design and illustration.

1876
Twin sister dies.

1883
Death of his mother.

1886
First trip to Europe. He and Charles work their way to England on a cattle boat. They visit Wales and possibly travel to Paris.

1887–90
Maurice and Charles return to the United States and settle in Winchester, Massachusetts, outside Boston. They save money so that Maurice can study art in Paris. By now an active, self-taught artist, he sketches in various places in New England.

1891
Makes first monotype print.

1891–ca. 95
Second trip to Europe; attends classes in Paris at the Académie Julien with Joseph Blanc, Benjamin Constant, and Jean Paul Laurens; also studies at the Colarossi School. Has first contact with the work of the Nabis painters. Meets the artist James Wilson Morrice. Travels to the French seacoast towns of Le Treport, Dieppe and, later, St. Malo and Dinard.

1893
Sketches, stolen from Prendergast's studio in Paris, come to the attention of James Whistler and are published under another artist's name in *The Studio*, a London art journal.

1895
Upon his return from Europe, Prendergast moves to Winchester with his brother Charles, who has started the frame shop that will provide a major source of income through 1914.

Participates in his first Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Annual Exhibition.

Meets William Glackens and Robert Henri.

James Matthew Barrie's *My Lady Nicotine*, with illustrations by Prendergast, is published in Boston.

1897
Begins exhibiting works regularly; first showing in New York, at the Watercolor Society's 8th Annual Exhibition.

1898
Begins to develop a reputation as an artist, is increasingly included in group exhibitions and starts making sales, mostly to other Boston artists.

1898–99
Third trip to Europe, probably financed by the collector, painter, and photographer, Sarah Choate Sears (Mrs. J. Montgomery Sears). Visits France (Paris, St. Malo) and Italy (Siena, Florence, Rome, Capri, and Venice). Probably in Venice he sees and is influenced by the works of Carpaccio.

1900
Paintings shown in a two-man exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, along with those of his friend, the Boston painter Herman Dudley Murphy.

Through an introduction by Arthur B. Davies, begins an affiliation with the Macbeth Gallery in New York, where an exhibition of his watercolors and monotypes is held.

Begins making regular visits to New York City, and commences series of watercolors of Central Park.

1901
Receives Bronze Medal for watercolors, Buffalo Pan-American Exposition – his first official recognition.

Death of his father.

Large retrospective of monotypes and watercolors, Cincinnati Art Museum.

1903
Moves with Charles from Winchester into Boston, continues regular practice of going to New England seacoast during summers.

1904
Exhibits with Arthur B. Davies, William Glackens, Robert Henri, George Luks, John Sloan, and others at the National Arts Club, New York, his first formal association with future members of The Eight.

1905
The therapy prescribed for his loss of hearing temporarily curtails his work; his hearing will thereafter deteriorate and at times limit his artistic activity.

Watercolors are included in exhibitions in Boston, Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Portland, Oregon, beginning a regular pattern of inclusion in various annual exhibitions.

1907
Fourth trip to Europe. Remains in Paris, sees numerous exhibitions, including an important and influential show of Cézanne watercolors, and is in contact with many artists and collectors.

1908
Seventeen paintings and watercolors included in The Eight's historic Macbeth Gallery exhibition, which travels to nine other American cities; none of his works sell.

1909–10
Fifth trip to Europe, late spring and summer spent in Paris and St. Malo.

1911–12
Sixth trip to Europe, first visit to Italy in eleven years. Meets his brother in Venice; they journey to Florence, Pisa, Siena, and possibly Orvieto and Ravenna.

1912
Joins the Society of American Painters and Sculptors.

1913
Seven works selected for the International Exhibition of Modern Art – the so-called Armory Show – organized by the Society of American Painters and Sculptors. Exhibition travels to Chicago; one work sells.

1914
Seventh and final trip to Europe, to Paris and St. Malo, sponsored by Lillie Bliss, an important supporter and friend of Prendergast, and the collector and lawyer John Quinn.

While abroad, elected to presidency of the short-lived Association of American Painters and Sculptors, an indication of the respect in which he is held by other artists.

Moves with Charles to New York, lives at 50 Washington Square South.

Continues to spend summers on New England coast through 1922.

1914–15
Produces two mural-sized paintings shown at the Montross Gallery, New York, and acquired by John Quinn in 1915.

1915
Major exhibition at the Carrol Gallery, New York, includes sixty paintings and watercolors, achieves great commercial success. John Quinn buys seven works from the show.

Albert Barnes, advised by William Glackens and Ferdinand Howald, starts buying works by Prendergast, many of which are given respectively to the Barnes Foundation and the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio.

1917
Exhibits with the newly formed Society of Independent Artists of which his brother Charles is Vice-President.

1920
Duncan Phillips makes the first of his many purchases of Prendergast's work.

1921
Small retrospective exhibition, Joseph Brummer Gallery, New York; all works framed by Charles.

ca. 1922
Health begins to deteriorate. Both brothers retire from public activities. Maurice's works continue to be requested for numerous exhibitions.

1923
Awarded Third William A. Clark Prize and Corcoran Bronze Medal, Corcoran Gallery Ninth Biennial Exhibition, Washington, D.C.; unable to attend exhibition ceremony.

1924
Dies February 1, in New York.

Dieppe, 1891

Dieppe, 1892

Views of Dieppe

The French town of Dieppe, the closest seaside resort to Paris, was a favorite subject of the Impressionists and other late 19th-century and early 20th-century artists, all of whom were attracted to the atmospheric effects produced when the sea and land met. Degas, Gauguin, Monet, the Canadian James Wilson Morrice, and other artists visited and painted there. Prendergast's scenes of the beach at Dieppe, made during his first extended trip abroad in the early 1890s, are among his first mature works. In addition, these views of Dieppe represent his earliest explorations of the oil medium, and of the waterside themes that were to absorb him throughout his life. The format of the Dieppe paintings – their compact elongation – is reminiscent of the intimist intensity in the work of Vuillard and other members of the Nabis group, who were first shown in Paris in 1891.

During his years of study in Paris, Prendergast primarily made sketches, monotypes, and small oil studies – appropriate media for an art student of very limited means. Though dated a year apart, the settings of the two oil studies of the beach at Dieppe suggest that they might have been done on the same day. Yet the later picture's more vivid coloration and articulated brushstrokes tellingly indicate Prendergast's rapid assimilation of contemporary Parisian artistic developments. Comparing these two scenes of Dieppe with the Museum's *Summer's Day*, ca. 1916–18, Prendergast's continued interest in the seaside subject matter is apparent. A quarter of a century later, skirt lengths have changed and Prendergast's color has become more opalescent, but his featureless, parasoled women still loll by the sea.

Paul Gauguin
Beach at Dieppe, 1885.
Oil
28⅛ × 28⅛ inches
Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

Along the Seine, 1892

Along the Seine

In keeping with the hurried character of urban life, the striding figure in *Along the Seine* shows a greater purposefulness than Prendergast's sedentary women by the sea. She is seen walking past the Pont du Carrousel, the middle of the three bridges connecting the Quai du Louvre and the Quai Voltaire. The Pont du Carrousel, sometimes known as the Pont des Saintes Pères, was built in 1832–34 of wood reinforced by iron. (It was reconstructed in 1935–39 into its present form of three simple stone arches.) Prendergast's fashionable figure is seen at a focal point of two of the bridge's arches as she walks along the Quai du Louvre, across the road from the grand museum itself, which Prendergast so frequently visited during these years.

Prendergast's life in Paris during this period was filled with fruitful contacts and offered him precisely the kind of artistic community that Boston lacked. His close friends included James Wilson Morrice, who introduced him to the British artists Charles Conder, Walter Sickert, and possibly even Aubrey Beardsley. The writers Arnold Bennett, Somerset Maugham, and Roderick O'Connor joined them for discussions at the Chat Noir café in Montparnasse. The artists and writers debated the merits of Degas, of the Nabis group (Bonnard, Denis, Vallotton, and Vuillard), of Toulouse-Lautrec, and of others. But it was above all Manet and Whistler who seem to be reflected in Prendergast's admiration. *Along the Seine* shows the influence of both of these artists, particularly of Manet's painterly richness and of Whistler's fascination with feminine élan. *Along the Seine* is painted in oil, a medium that Prendergast would not significantly use for another decade, and to which, one can speculate, he had been drawn, at least in part, by the formal requirements of his classes at the Académie Julien and the Colarossi School.

Central Park, 1900

Central Park, 1901

Watercolors of Central Park

In 1900, Prendergast, newly returned from Europe, became affiliated with the important Macbeth Gallery in New York. In March of that year, the gallery held its first exhibition of Prendergast's watercolors and monotypes. The show was an impressive success, and Prendergast began visiting New York regularly. Among the first works that derived from these visits were watercolors of Central Park. While richly detailed and representational, they betray a visitor's charmed infatuation with this urban playground. The Central Park watercolors bring to a close the 19th-century phase of Prendergast's art, and as Hedley H. Rhys has remarked, they "are an invaluable record of the idle summer days in Central Park at the turn of the century."[8]

The park, designed in 1858 by Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, was a completely man-made site. On the threshold of the new century its character was undergoing dramatic changes. In June of 1899, a request to drive an automobile in the park was denied as it "might frighten horses and otherwise be a disfigurement or annoyance."[9] Though by the late fall the first such permit was issued, Prendergast's Central Park was never to admit the automobile. Nor did Prendergast allow other signs of modernity to intrude. The rather conventional and wooden movements of his horses do not acknowledge the verist representation available from 1878, when Muybridge first published his photographic studies of horses in motion, or the accuracy of

May Day, Central Park, ca. 1901

Thomas Eakins' *The Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand*, painted the following year. And Prendergast's *May Day*, classically celebrated with garlands and dancing, remains unaffected by the fact that in 1889 the Second Socialist International declared May 1st as a world holiday for radical laborers.

What Prendergast's vision does recall is the old world elegance of Parisian parks, as seen in Vuillard's *The Promenade* of 1892. Prendergast's watercolors, monotypes, and later paintings of Central Park are composed with verdant or autumnal colors. Tall, straight trees rise from the horizontal paths created by walkways and park benches, or stand out sharply against a band of sky. The colors in these scenes glow against the whiteness of exposed paper. Prendergast's Central Park pictures are halcyon visions of an older world seen on the brink of a new epoch.

Edouard Vuillard
Under the Trees, 1894.
Distemper on canvas
84½ × 38½ inches
The Cleveland Museum of Art,
Gift of Hanna Fund

Thomas Eakins
Fairman Rogers Four-in-Hand, 1879.
Oil on canvas
24 × 36 inches
Collection of the Philadelphia Museum of Art

Eadweard Muybridge
The Horse in Motion, 1878.
Photograph
Stanford University Museum of Art

Copyright, 1878, by MUYBRIDGE
THE HORSE IN MOTION
"ABE EDGINGTON," owned by LELAND STANFORD; driven by C. MARVIN, trotting at a 2.24 gait over the Palo Alto track, 15th June 1878.

Anonymous
Central Park, New York, on a Sunday Afternoon, ca. 1900.
Photograph
Bettman Archives

Madison Square

New York City's Madison Square is bounded by East 23rd and East 26th Streets between Fifth and Madison Avenues. Its appearance at the turn of the century was described as "an incessant progression: carriages and cabs, stages, drays, policemen on horseback, automobiles uncountable, ladies driving down to shops or on social errands in lower Fifth Avenue, all kinds of interesting people . . . a ceaseless and spirited panorama."[10] During the last quarter of the 19th century, the square was the social and business center of New York. After 1900 its prestige as a place of residence for the rich was gradually relinquished to the area surrounding Central Park.

Prendergast's view of Madison Square is eastward; on the corner of 23rd Street and Madison Avenue, the Metropolitan Building, built in 1890–93, can be seen. The spire of Madison Square Presbyterian Church (often referred to as Dr. Parkhurst's Church) is faintly visible in the corner of the banner, which advertises the Pan American Exposition. This large invitational exhibition of the work of both North and South American artists was held in Buffalo, New York, from May 1 to November 1, 1901. (It was at the Pan American Exposition that President William McKinley received the gunshot wounds from which he died one week later.) In the catalogue of the exposition, Prendergast is represented by four watercolors, one of which, *The Stony Beach*, was awarded a bronze medal, his first official recognition.

It would appear from the dress of the figures that Prendergast's rendering of the scene was made in the spring or summer of 1901. *Madison Square* is more loosely painted than the earlier of the Central Park views and has a greater sense of spontaneity. Prendergast nevertheless constructed his composition carefully, and his characteristic pencil sketch lines are clearly visible in certain areas. Indeed, his assured handling of the watercolor medium is everywhere apparent.

Madison Square, ca. 1901
(*on cover in color*)

Picnic Grove

Picnic Grove is the latest watercolor in the Museum's collection, and it provides clear evidence of the artist's changing attitudes toward the medium and toward the nature of his art. As the early years of his art were dominated by his work in watercolor, the later years were primarily devoted to painting in oil. Preferring to alter and recompose his painting over extended periods, the studied image replaced the spontaneous one, and oil, not watercolor, became his chosen medium. Thus, the relatively few watercolors he did execute after 1910 present a paradox. Instead of relating to the often reworked surfaces of his oil paintings, the forms of watercolors like *Picnic Grove* become looser and freer – brighter in color but less particularized in detail. They stand in contrast to the embellished virtuosity of his watercolors of the turn of the century. As Lloyd Goodrich observed of these later watercolors, "naturalism gave way more and more to decoration and expression of mood. . . . His pictures became arabesques in which figures and objects had only symbolic value, evocations of a dreamlike world of perpetual childhood and eternal summer."[11]

Picnic Grove, ca. 1910–15

The Promenade, 1913

The Promenade

The Promenade is a fine example of Prendergast's achievement as an American modernist. The freedom with which he handles the paint and the ambiguous placement of the figures in the landscape relate his work more to certain paintings by Matisse than to those of any other artist. Indeed, of the six works Prendergast sketched when visiting the Armory Show in 1913, four were by Matisse. *The Promenade* shares with Matisse's *Luxe, Calme et Volupté* (1904–5), *Le Luxe, I* (1907), and several other Matisse works of this period, a pastoral sensuality and Arcadian liberty.[12] As in Matisse's compositions, Prendergast's isolated and uncommunicative women, disposed in a frieze-like arrangement across the field, display almost balletic gestures. The pointillist technique of *Lux, Calme et Volupté*, its clothed and unclothed figures, the water, bay, boat, and hills in the background, and the attenuated verticality of the tree bear striking similarities to Prendergast's later work. Both Prendergast and Matisse have origins in the art of Puvis de Chavannes, the Nabis, and Paul Signac. As Cézanne's art may be considered the progenitor of much of Prendergast's earlier work, so Matisse's painting is fundamental to Prendergast's work after 1913.

Though *The Promenade* is a title used frequently by Prendergast, most notably identifying works in the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio, and the Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan, the Whitney's painting is not obviously part of a series. Rather, it is typical of the general thematic interests of most of Prendergast's later paintings, where drawing is subordinated to the increasingly unstructured rendering of idyllic seaside scenes peopled with female figures, often of a somewhat androgenous nature. *The Promenade* was formerly in the collection of John Quinn, perhaps the most important American patron of avant-garde art and literature in the early 20th century.

In Central Park, ca. 1914–15

Maurice Prendergast
Central Park in 1903, n.d.
Oil on canvas
20¾ × 27 inches
Metropolitan Museum of Art,
George A. Hearn Fund, 1950

In Central Park

The differences between Prendergast's oil paintings and watercolors are epitomized by comparing *In Central Park* with the Museum's earlier watercolors of the same subject. The delicacy, detail, and suspended motion of the watercolors are here exchanged for blunt expressiveness, solidity of form, and coloristic complexity.

A related oil of the subject, *Central Park in 1903*, is in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Despite the date in its title, it was painted later.) Both works are *about* Central Park rather than *of* it. Unlike the tripartite structure of the 1901–2 watercolors, and their division into three successive horizontal bands of information, the space in the Whitney Museum's painting is more compressed. The forms of the women in white have been stylized into "bowling pin" shapes. Curious quirks, like the careful but distorted sketched bases of the benches, add subtle linear elements to an essentially weighty and arrested image. It is also noteworthy that, since stylistically the painting may have been done after 1914, Washington Square Park, which Prendergast overlooked from his studio apartment, was not its subject. No views of this park are known in Prendergast's art. Perhaps – as with his short-lived exploration of the still-life theme – Prendergast, after the crystalline bravado of the turn-of-the-century watercolors, preferred to distance himself from his subject matter. Rather than paint on the site, or from studies made there, he wished to imaginatively recollect the scenes he knew so well.

Cinerarias and Fruit, 1915

Maurice Prendergast
Still Life, 1913
Oil
15 × 18 inches
Collection unknown

Maurice Prendergast
Still Life, 1915.
Oil on canvas
18½ × 21 inches
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Gift of
Mrs. Eugenie Prendergast

Maurice Prendergast
Still Life with Bottle, n.d.
Oil
15 × 20 inches
Private collection

Cinerarias and Fruit

Prendergast turned to the still-life theme as infrequently as he did to single figure subjects. Both portraits and still lifes require the kind of individuated ingredients and concern for detail that conflicted with Prendergast's essential pictorial skill and aesthetic vision. One can date his general interest in still lifes to 1905, when he wrote in a letter to his friend and fellow artist Mrs. Oliver Williams: "I haven't forgotten those wonderful flowers you showed us Christmas morning. I am gradually coming around to flowers and you knocked into my head that . . . something great can be painted with them."[13] His first, tentative still lifes – single vases of flowers on a table – occurred in the context of paintings of single figures, i.e. *Woman in Green Dress*, 1906, or *La Rouge*, 1913.[14] It was as if the inclusion of a still life would turn what was essentially a portrait into a composition worthy of a painting.

Prendergast produced several straightforward depictions of bountiful flower arrangements between 1910 and 1917, but only three other still lifes as complex as the Whitney Museum's *Cinerarias and Fruit* are known. All painted between 1913 and 1915, two include potted plants similar to the Whitney painting's cinerarias, a flowering herb, native to the Canary Islands, that was popularly used as a house plant. These four works share a pictorial vocabulary of bottles, fruit jars, and teacups. They recall Cézanne's treatment of the still-life theme, and it is not surprising to learn that in 1915 Prendergast had given Vollard's recent book on Cézanne to Mrs. Williams. Prendergast's continuing identification with Cézanne's art is apparent from the tilting diagonal of the table, the freely applied pigment, the contours of the multicolored apples, and his use of simple country pottery. An intriguing aspect of the Museum's still life is the blue-outlined pitcher at the left edge of the work. Transparent, like a ghost image, it echoes the blue pitcher at the center of the composition. Comparable to the double image of the fruit stand and fruit of *Still Life*, 1915, in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, it records an alternative variation of the forms within the completed composition. The free experimentation of these still lifes fully justifies Prendergast's categorization as a modernist. Their quality makes one sorry that Prendergast did not pursue the still-life genre more extensively. But groupings of people in a landscape always held the greater attraction for him.

The Cove

After 1914, Prendergast increasingly chose to depict the same or very similar scenes – essentially multi-figured seaside landscapes. His interest in creating thematic series may go back to Monet's *Haystack* paintings, which he had seen in Paris in 1892. In 1904, Prendergast exhibited seven small, numbered paintings of the same title, *Promenade on the Sea Shore*, in the pivotal National Arts Club show in New York, when he first showed with future members of The Eight. Paintings which incorporated the words "Promenade" or "Cove" in their titles frequently occur in the years following the 1913 Armory Show, during his residence in New York City in the final decade of his life. The theme and composition of *The Cove* exemplify Prendergast's artistic activities in this period. Though its composition is atypically treeless, it manifests notable similarities with numerous works of this time.[15] All contain the typical late Prendergast seascape with the assertive shape of a rocky, grass-knolled promontory jutting out from the right – a land mass which, in the case of *The Cove*, becomes a truncated, lumpish island. The almost signatory orange solar disk in the upper left quadrant of these paintings appears in *The Cove* as "a bleaching sun"[16] and a vague parasol shape above a spectral, sketched figure. Used again and again in the later paintings, this orange sun shape underwent continual and lengthy revision.

The Cove, 1916

Bathing Beach

At least as early as 1905, hoping to correct his loss of hearing and improve his general health, Prendergast regularly bathed nude in the sea. Swimming and sunbathing were, in Prendergast's words, "the finest sensation I know on a spring day . . . all ages and classes seem to come here."[17] His almost Whitmanesque ode to nature is reflected in works like *Bathing Beach*, a pastel and watercolor composition. Dated 1901–2 at the time of its acquisition, it is clearly a later work, unrelated to the more detailed, tightly drawn Venetian and Central Park watercolors of the turn of the century. Moreover, the only pastels, or works labeled as such, shown during Prendergast's lifetime were exhibited in 1917 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts Annual Exhibition. Since the Academy required recently made work for their annual exhibitions, current research suggests that the dating of these pastels may be limited to the period of 1915–17.[18] Moreover, their more textured surface, loose structure, and intentional lack of detail ally them with paintings made after 1914, the beginning of the last phase of Prendergast's art.

This combination of watercolor and pastel created greater opacity and the opportunity to incorporate, without appearing "unfinished," the whiteness of the paper support.

Bathing Beach, ca. 1915.

Under the Trees (Number 2), ca. 1914

Summer's Day, ca. 1916–18

Under the Trees (Number 2) & Summer's Day

As Prendergast's painting style matured, he abandoned the pretext of traditional perspective and naturalistic representation, preferring instead mannerist devices of distortion, elongation, and flattening. In *Under the Trees (Number 2)*, painted around 1914, the scale of the figures challenges that of the trees. A horse in the background seems to hover over the land, its hindquarters dissolving into a tree trunk. Whereas earlier watercolors and paintings were done at one sitting and captured a particular scene, almost all of Prendergast's later work abstracted and generalized its subject. For example, the sails of the boat in *Summer's Day*, ca. 1916–18, are reduced to blue outlines against a variegated background, and the shoreline is populated with blue cartooned forms. A pink triad of women unifies a chorus of circle-headed and cipherous figures. As his art evolved, it becomes more difficult to ascertain precisely when a work was made. Painted over extended periods, works such as *Under the Trees (Number 2)* and *Summer's Day* are encrusted, waxy, and shimmering accretions of muted and pastel shades expressing his recurrent theme: figures by the sea.

Notes

1. John Sloan, *Gist of Art* (New York: American Artists Group, Inc., 1939), p. 44.

2. Hedley Howell Rhys, *Maurice Prendergast 1859–1924* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 44.

3. Ibid.

4. For example, Prendergast was not included in the recent important exhibition *Avant-Garde Painting & Sculpture in America, 1910–25* (Wilmington, Delaware: Delaware Art Museum, 1975).

5. Maurice Prendergast, Paris, October 10, 1907, Letter to Esther Williams, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

6. Amy Goldin, "How Are the Prendergasts Modern?" *Art in America*, September–October 1976, p. 61.

7. Royal Cortissoz, "The Original Art of Maurice Prendergast: A Memorial Show at the Whitney Museum," *New York Herald Tribune*, February 24, 1934, p. 10.

8. Hedley Howell Rhys, *Maurice Prendergast*, p. 40.

9. *The New York Times*, June 30, 1899, p. 14.

10. E. S. Martin, "Moods of a City Square," *Harpers Magazine*, 115 (August 1907), p. 406.

11. Lloyd Goodrich, *American Watercolor and Winslow Homer*, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1955, p. 53.

12. Prendergast sketched *Le Luxe, I* when it was shown in the 1907 Paris Salon d'Automne.

13. Letter from Maurice Prendergast to Mrs. Oliver Williams, March 5, 1905, in Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

14. In keeping with Prendergast's emphasis on abstraction and generalization, all of his paintings of single figures, with the exception of his portrait of Mrs. Williams (ca. 1902–4), are of anonymous, unidentified sitters.

15. See, for example, *The Promenade*, Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio; *On the Beach No. 3*, 1918, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Hinman B. Hulburt Collection; *Outer Harbor*, The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio; *Willows, Salem*, ca. 1918, Newark Museum; *Landscape with Figures*, ca. 1912, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica, New York; *Promenade*, 1913–15, Private Collection; *Picnic*, n.d., The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

16. Eleanor Green, *Maurice Prendergast: Art of Impulse and Color* (College Park, Maryland: University of Maryland Art Gallery, The University of Maryland, 1977), p. 166.

17. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Esther (Mrs. Oliver) Williams, Letter from Maurice Prendergast, May 14, 1905.

18. Eleanor Green, *Maurice Prendergast: Art of Impulse and Color*, p. 161.

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Works in the Permanent Collection

Dieppe, 1891
Oil on canvas, 12¾ × 9½ inches
Gift of Arthur G. Altschul. 75.51

Dieppe, 1892
Oil on canvas, 13 × 9¾ inches
Purchase. 39.28

Along the Seine, 1892
Oil on canvas, 13 × 9½ inches
Purchase. 39.27

Central Park, 1900
Watercolor on paper, 14⅜ × 21½ inches
Purchase. 32.41

Central Park, 1901
Watercolor on paper, 14⅜ × 21½ inches
Purchase. 32.42

May Day, Central Park, ca. 1901
Watercolor on paper, 14½ × 21⅝ inches
Purchase (and exchange). 48.19

Madison Square, ca. 1901
Watercolor on paper, 15 × 16½ inches
Bequest of Joan Whitney Payson. 76.14

Picnic Grove, ca. 1910–15
Watercolor on paper, 12¾ × 19¾ inches
Gift of Arthur G. Altschul. 76.40

Bathing Beach, ca. 1915
Pastel and watercolor on paper,
13⅜ × 19¼ inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.
31.456

The Promenade, 1913
Oil on canvas, 30 × 34 inches
Bequest of Alexander M. Bing. 60.10

Under the Trees (Number 2), ca. 1914
Oil on canvas, 19 × 24 inches
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Arthur G. Altschul.
71.229

In Central Park, ca. 1914–16
Oil on canvas, 17 × 22½ inches
Promised gift of Mrs. Percy Uris. 22.77

Cinerarias and Fruit, 1915
Oil on canvas, 21 × 27 inches
Purchase. 32.48

The Cove, 1916
Oil on canvas, 28 × 39¾ inches
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney.
31.322

Summer's Day, ca. 1916–18
Oil on canvas, 20¼ × 28¼ inches
Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest. 77.1.43

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